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Social Psychological Theories on Social Inequalities*

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Although social psychology focuses on the relationships between individuals and their social environments, it has often failed to fully incorporate actors' social structural positions (e.g., their location in the social hierarchies of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual identity). In this paper we analyze patterns in social psychology's approach to social inequalities, which we argue has been characterized by neglect, a focus on difference rather than on similarity, a tendency toward essentialism, and a lack of attention to social context and power. We then focus in turn on the three major theoretical traditions in sociological social psychology—social exchange, social cognition, and symbolic interaction—and summarize how each has (or has not) addressed the topic of inequality. We conclude by presenting four directions for future research that we believe will move social psychology toward a clearer understanding of social inequalities.

Sociological social psychological theory has developed along multiple lines throughout the twentieth century. Social cognition has mapped the structures and processes of human thought. Social exchange theory has examined the conditions under which interaction occurs and individual choices are made. Symbolic interactionism has addressed the symbolic structure of social life: how meaning is created and communicated, how self and identity develop.

Although these trajectories have been productive, each has developed largely independently of the others and, to some extent, of sociological theories and concerns, a point House (1977) raised more than 20 years ago. Despite House's warning, however, this lack of theoretical cross-fertilization has continued and, we argue, has impeded the resulting generation of knowledge. Each theory contains an implicit critique of other approaches; yet because these perspectives are independent, theorists have not had to respond to these critiques. Moreover, because of the relative dissociation of social psychology from

sociology more generally, sociology has benefited less that it might from social psychological insight, and social psychology has frequently been immune from sociological emphases. In particular, social psychology has often evaded issues of social structure and power.

A particularly telling indicator of this neglect is social psychology's treatment of social inequality: the patterned distributions of power, resources, and privileges among defined sets of actors, organized in social categories associated with relations of hierarchy and dominance. Social psychology seems especially well suited to analyze inequality. Because the field focuses on relationships between individuals and their social environments, it seems self-evident that actors' social structural positions (e.g., their location in the hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and/or nationality) should be important foci of theory. Indeed, inequality is one of sociology's most central concerns; thus it seems logical that sociological social psychologists would address it.

Nevertheless, many social psychologists have explored such questions in only limited ways, if at all. As we demonstrate below, social psychologists tend to restrict their analyses to the micro level of thought and interaction, rather than framing their analyses in terms of the larger patterns of inequal-

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ities and asymmetric power relations that these individual-level patterns reflect. Analyses have focused on differences, rather than on the inequalities almost always associated with those differences (Howard and Hollander 1997).

In this paper we use the example of social inequality to illustrate our two major points: first, that social psychological theory has neglected systems of social hierarchy such as race, class, gender, and sexuality; and second, that one reason for this neglect has been the lack of theoretical integration, both within social psychology and with sociology more generally. Our critique focuses on the three major theoretical perspectives in sociological social psychology—social exchange, social cognition, and symbolic interactionism—and on empirical work based on these perspectives. Our analysis is also applicable, however, to much other work in social psychology, both theoretical and applied. We begin by discussing overall patterns in the social psychological treatment of inequality. We then turn to the three theoretical perspectives, and discuss how each has (or has not) approached social inequalities. We conclude with suggestions for future research and theorizing in the twenty-first century.

PATTERNS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY'S APPROACH TO SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Neglect

Until recent decades, the most striking pattern in social psychology's treatment of social inequality was neglect. In regard to gender, for example, many social psychological studies used only one sex (usually men) as subjects until the 1970s, and assumed either that the processes being studied were so general as to apply to all humans or that women's behavior would be the opposite of men's. Throughout the twentieth century, virtually all studies used only white subjects, not only because whiteness was taken as the norm, but also because the great majority of college students—the normative population of experimental subjects—were white. To some extent this situation continues: most social psychological studies still use white college students as subjects, or ignore the

possible confound that might be introduced by variation in subjects' racial and class backgrounds. Indeed, very little research has been conducted on issues related to class, and research subjects' class position is rarely assessed (Graham 1992). The importance of socioeconomic position for explaining social behavior has been acknowledged primarily at the margins of social psychology (e.g., Argyle 1994; Wexler 1983). Also, until quite recently, little work has been done on issues of sexuality (except for the topic of physical attractiveness), and it is a rare study that asks participants to report their sexual identity.

In recent years, this neglect has been challenged by critiques from various social movements, such as the women's movement and the civil rights movement, and by the increasing diversity of the academy. Feminist critiques, for example, have changed these norms such that most studies now include both women and men, and gender is an increasingly common topic of research. Race is addressed less frequently, however, and class and sexuality remain virtually invisible.

The Focus on Difference

When social psychologists have addressed social positions, they have often focused on overall group differences rather than on the interactional, contextual, or hierarchical aspects of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Most research on gender, for example, has focused on differences between women and men, even though research shows very few significant sex differences (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Research on race, sexuality, and social class, especially in the social structure and personality tradition, also has focused on group differences.

There are several reasons for this focus. First, research on cognition has demonstrated that humans categorize information whenever possible. Because social positions are often visible, they are a ready basis for cognitive categorization. Second, gender, race, class, and sexuality are important sources of identity in Western societies, and this cultural centrality has influenced social psychological research (Cherry 1995). Third, over the twentieth century, social psychology (like other sciences) has increasingly relied

on procedures designed to identify statistically significant differences among groups. Statistically significant differences, however, may not always be substantively significant.

Although this focus on difference may be understandable, we believe it is deeply problematic. Expectations of group differences may act as self-fulfilling prophecies, predisposing researchers to overlook group similarities and to exaggerate or even elicit information that confirms their preconceptions. Moreover, a focus on differences facilitates an essentialist understanding of social groups by neglecting issues of power, context, and structure.

The Tendency Toward Essentialism

Social psychologists often conceptualize race, class, gender, and sexuality as individual characteristics and identities rather than as locations in systems of social hierarchy. This practice, combined with the focus on difference described above, tends to imply that group differences can be explained by group members' essential natures. Although essentialism is no longer explicit in most social psychological research (as it was in the first half of the twentieth century), underlying assumptions often are consistent with essentialism. For example, sex is often used as a variable representing gender: subjects are categorized as females or as males, and any differences found between the two groups are labeled "gender differences." Without further exploration of the source of these differences, the implication is that "gender" is a sufficient explanation: in other words, that women and men are simply different. Alternatively, gender differences may be attributed to socialization; socialization, however, is often treated not as a reflection of structural sources of gender inequality, but rather as an explanation in its own right. Gender socialization is conceptualized as so deep-seated that it persists throughout the life course. Thus, in practical terms, gender is still treated as internal and unchangeable.

A similar argument can be made for the treatment of race. Although most social psychologists now argue that race is socially constructed, the vast majority of empirical studies investigate only the possibility of dif-

ference (almost always between whites and blacks) and accept "race" as a self-evident explanation for any differences found. Interestingly, socialization has been used less frequently to explain race than gender.

Because gender, race, and sexuality all have close associations with bodies—with chromosomes and physiology, skin color, and sexual behavior—it has been easy to rely on essentialist explanations. It is not so easy, however, to connect social class with biology. As a result, social class is the only one of these four social systems that has consistently been associated with nonessentialist perspectives. Some research on class, however, relies on culture-based explanations—for example, to account for the persistence of poverty and wealth—that are vulnerable to the same problems as explanations based on socialization.

Ignoring Social Context

A focus on difference also ignores the contextual embeddedness of behavior. Studies have demonstrated that individuals' behaviors can change significantly from one situation to the next (e.g., Moskowitz, Suh, and Desaulniers 1994); research results therefore depend on which situations are examined. Indeed, the experimental laboratory, which is the site of most social psychological research, is itself no more neutral than any other social situation, and thus affects the expression of gender, race, class, and sexuality. The reasons for using experimental procedures and laboratory settings are sound: these strategies maximize internal validity and control over extraneous factors. At the same time, however, external validity may be compromised and the importance of social context may become invisible.

Ignoring Inequality

Finally, a focus on group differences often obscures the fact that *different* almost always means *unequal*. In other words, such research tends to ignore power relationships. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1987:75–76) write that in the study of gender, "relations have been interpreted as differences. The greater social power of men and the sexual division of labor are interpreted as 'sexual

dimorphism' in behavior. With this, the whole question of social structure is spirited away." A similar argument can be made for power differences within groups, which are obscured when the focus is on intergroup comparison.

Summary

Thus we argue that focusing on difference is insufficient if social psychologists are to understand the workings of inequality in social life. Yet the fact that existing research on differences may be inadequate does not mean that it should be ignored. The belief that members of social groups are fundamentally different is widely shared. Such beliefs, regardless of their validity, influence identities, thoughts, and interactions, and may result in systematic behavioral differences even if there is no underlying variation in ability or traits. In other words, these beliefs have material consequences regardless of their basis (or lack of basis) in fact. Thus we contend that the existing research must be taken seriously, if only to understand how essentialist beliefs shape social psychological research and social life.

We turn now to the three major theoretical traditions in sociological social psychology, and discuss how each has addressed the issue of social inequality and what questions remain unanswered. As illustrated in our discussion below, these theories vary greatly in their potential and actual attention to inequality.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE

Of the three theories we discuss here, social exchange has arguably exerted the greatest influence on mainstream sociology, certainly in the past several decades. Indeed, in many ways it is the most sociological of the theories: it focuses on interaction rather than on individuals, it emphasizes social context and social structure, and it is centrally concerned with power (Emerson 1972).

Because of these emphases, it seems logical that much exchange research would focus on the workings of inequality in society. Curiously, this has not been the case: researchers have largely ignored the social

systems that affect actors' resources, alternatives, and choices and that therefore are central to power in the world outside the experimental laboratory. Although researchers in other disciplines (e.g., social work, criminal justice) have used concepts from exchange theory to understand topics relevant to social inequality, most research by social exchange theorists barely mentions these issues.

Gender is a partial exception. Many studies include sex as an independent variable: most use equal numbers of female and male subjects, and a few report sex differences (or similarities) in behavior, while others explore gendered topics. In a review chapter, Molm and Hedley (1992) bring together existing studies on gender and the use of power; they conclude, among other findings, that women behave like power-disadvantaged actors regardless of their own power position, responding strategically to the degree of mutual dependence but not to power imbalance, even when it is in their favor. Gender differences in power use, however, explain very little variation in power outcomes or strategies; Molm and Hedley argue that it is the association of gender with structural power that accounts for apparent gender differences in power use. Although this kind of analysis is clearly needed, little other work in the social exchange tradition has moved beyond the concept of sex differences to a more sophisticated conceptualization of gender.

Age has also received some attention within exchange theory. Cook and Donnelly (1996) explain altruistic behavior by elderly parents and power-balancing efforts by their children as a consequence of long-term exchange relationships within families. Research on exchanges based on other social categories—race, class, or sexuality—is essentially invisible.

Why is there such a disjuncture between social exchange theory and empirical research? As suggested above, the experimental methodology used in much exchange research works against investigation of these issues. Although the theory focuses on relationships between people, experimental procedures typically sanitize interaction to such a degree that the participants are isolated in

different rooms and may never see, hear, or talk to each other. When subjects do not see or hear each other, however, the everyday social cues that are associated with gender, race, and class—such as appearance, speech, and behavior patterns—are artificially removed from the situation. These cues are central to real-life interaction; by controlling them, exchange researchers fail to address their influence on real-world exchange behavior. These cues are removed for a good reason: to aid in the development of general theory that can explain social behavior, including inequality. It may be, however, that inequality is so fundamental to social life as to be inseparable from interaction.

In addition, although structural position and its effects on the availability of resources are a central part of the theory as outlined by Emerson, in practice structure tends to be operationalized quite narrowly. Exchange researchers generally focus on individuals and limit their analysis to dyadic or small-group interaction rather than examining social groups, organizations, and institutions. As a result, the connection to real-world social structures is rarely explored.

Finally, we suggest that the invisibility of social inequality also stems from the theory's conceptualization of social actors. Individuals, according to exchange theory, come to interaction essentially as equals. They may possess different resources or occupy different structural positions, but they are otherwise interchangeable. The theory implies that these resources and positions are not permanently attached to individuals but are malleable and transferable. The historical development and meaning of these resources, and of other group characteristics, are not central. This allows the exchange theorist to neglect the more insidious consequences of social positions.

SOCIAL COGNITION

In contrast to social exchange theory, social cognition has paid considerable attention to social inequalities, especially those based on gender and race. Social cognition makes a simple but fundamental assumption: thought shapes feeling and behavior. Because human cognitive capacities are lim-

ited, we often behave as "cognitive misers," streamlining information to manage the demands of everyday interaction. One strategy that facilitates cognitive efficiency is categorization. Because social systems such as race and gender are readily available bases for categorization, social cognition research has attended to these systems.

The Organization of Thought

Attitudes. Early approaches to social cognition emphasized beliefs, attitudes, and values. Attitudes toward both racial minority groups and women began to receive attention in the 1970s, in response to the civil rights and women's movements. Attitudes toward women have been assessed in terms of the endorsement of gender-prescribed roles (e.g., Spence and Helmreich 1972). In contrast, attitudes toward racial groups have focused on general evaluations (e.g., Stephan and Rosenfield 1982).

A second emphasis of attitude research addresses the changing nature of prejudice. Although attitudes toward women seem to have become more liberal over time (Spence and Hahn 1997), recent research demonstrates that neither racial nor gender prejudice has vanished (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986; Glick and Fiske 1996). Both literatures focus on attitudes toward those in the less powerful position of a social hierarchy: women in a gender system, blacks in a racial system. Attitudes about men, whites, heterosexuals, and wealthy people have received considerably less attention.

Social Schemas. Contemporary social cognition emphasizes the organization of thought in social schemas. Both self-schemas and schemas about social groups are organized in part around social positions. Accordingly, considerable research has been conducted on schemas and stereotypes related at least to gender and race, although there is much less research on schemas about class and sexuality, or on intersections among these schemas.

Early research on gender group schemas focused on personality attributes, reporting that men generally are rated high on instrumental attributes, whereas women are rated high on expressive attributes (Brownerman et

al. 1972). Beliefs about gender are represented at different levels of specificity (Deaux 1995); subtypes are developed in part through the intersections of gender with other significant social statuses such as race (Stangor et al. 1992), age, (Brewer, Dull, and Lui 1981), or sexual identity (Kite and Deaux 1987).

Similarly, personality traits have been the most common components of racial group schemas. Many researchers suggest that racial stereotypes in the United States have faded over the years. Devine and Elliot (1995) disagree, however: focusing on stereotypes about African-Americans, they show that white students identify clear, consistent, and highly negative group schemas about blacks, but also subscribe to an equally consistent and positive set of personal beliefs about blacks. Thus it is possible to categorize on the basis of a stereotype, even while denying its truth.

Although considerable attention has been devoted to whites' stereotypes about blacks, less attention has been given to stereotypes about other racial and ethnic groups, such as Latino/as or Asians. Stereotypes about whites have received almost no attention, although the little existing research suggests that Americans of color stereotype whites in quite derogatory terms (Stephan and Rosenfield 1982).

Social psychologists have asked different, and fewer, questions about class. Although we know of no contemporary studies that assess the content of schemas about class position, several older studies assessed perceived traits of combined race and class position (Bayton, McAlister, and Hamer 1956). More recently, several studies have used vignettes to shape perceptions of class positions, providing indirect indicators of class schemas (Howard and Pike 1986). Finally, the relationship between social class and self-esteem has received considerable attention (Kohn 1969; Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978).

Thinking: Processing Information

Cognitive structures have profound implications for cognitive processes, including attention, memory, and social inference.

Attention is determined largely by salience, which is shaped by group schemas: violation of schema-based expectations increases salience and therefore heightens attention (Taylor et al. 1978). This differential salience in turn can affect cognitive judgments such as attributions of causality and personal evaluations; such judgments are potentially associated with social inequalities (Langer et al. 1976).

Schemas also shape memory and retrieval. When we process information in terms of existing schemas, we are likely to remember information that is consistent with those schemas and to make judgments that confirm them (Snyder and Uranowitz 1978). Schemas even affect how we gather information: we are less likely to seek information about outgroup members and therefore tend to have much less complex conceptions of outgroups than of ingroups. People recall more information about ingroup than outgroup members and are more likely to recall negative details about members of disliked outgroups (Taylor and Jaggi 1974). These effects of social schemas on memory thus perpetuate stereotypes.

Schemas also form the bases for social inferences such as predictions, decisions, or causal attributions. Estimates of probability about group membership, for example, rely on the cognitive availability of information, which in turn reflects existing group schemas. This availability heuristic underlies significant social patterns: high-status people, for example, exaggerate the size of upper classes, envisioning a relatively egalitarian society, whereas low-status people exaggerate the size of the lower classes, envisioning an elitist society (Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992).

Attributional studies have also assessed how people explain class positions. Members of socially advantaged groups generally attribute the disadvantaged positions of others to their personal inadequacies, as self-interest would predict. In contradiction to their own self-interest, however, members of lower economic classes may legitimize not only the social positions of those with more economic advantages, but also their own social positions (Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980). The fundamental attribution error encourages members of subordinate social

positions to accept responsibility for their own disadvantages; the actor-observer bias encourages members of advantaged social groups to view their own advantages as situational and others' disadvantages as self-produced (Taylor and Jaggi 1974).

Thus, social cognition research has focused on the stability of the cognitive underpinnings of systems of inequality, primarily because of the need for cognitive efficiency. Although social cognition has paid much more attention to social statuses than has social exchange theory, it has had little to say about actual interaction. Most research is conducted inside the experimental laboratory, in social contexts that are often far removed from daily life. And like social exchange theory, social cognition frequently fails to address the social structural contexts in which interaction occurs.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interactionism (SI) takes a markedly different approach. The central argument of symbolic interactionism is that people attach symbolic meaning to objects, behaviors, and other people, and develop and transmit these meanings through interaction. Social positions are a crucial part of these cultural systems of meaning.

The Construction of Social Inequalities

One focus of SI has been the social construction of social identities and inequalities. This has been particularly true for gender, beginning with Garfinkel's (1967) now-classic case study of the transsexual Agnes. Presentation of self, or impression management, is one important mechanism for the construction of gender; Goffman (1976) argued that gender displays are indications of actors' cultural competence rather than signs of underlying sex difference. West and Zimmerman (1987) present gender inequalities as one accomplishment of interaction, through which we hold ourselves and other actors accountable for these constructed differences. Crawford (1995) demonstrates the central role of talk in constructing such differences. Because these identity negotiations are strongly influenced by existing stereotypes and beliefs about social categories, ulti-

mately they often reproduce social inequalities.

Symbolic interactionists have also addressed the social construction of race. In an early essay, Blumer (1958) emphasized race prejudice as a collective phenomenon, rooted in the way groups see themselves in relation to other groups. This sense of group position develops through interaction and communication among group members. Bobo and Hutchings (1996) find support for this theory in their analysis of survey data from Los Angeles.

Symbolic interactionists have also demonstrated the social construction of sexuality. A number of older studies, for example, emphasize that in other cultures homosexuality is not stigmatized as it is in the United States (Ford and Beach 1951). Moreover, the meanings of sexuality vary according to the social context, even within a single culture.

Less work has been done on the social construction of class, perhaps because social class has been analyzed so pervasively in terms of institutional factors and the allocation of material resources. At the same time, some research shows that class position affects everyday interactions. Emmelman (1994) demonstrates that defense attorneys' behavior is associated with their clients' class status, while Rollins (1985) describes how female employers of domestics require acts of deference from their maids. Paralleling the cognitive literature on attributions about social class, Wolf (1986) addresses the interactional complexities for members of subordinated groups, showing how such people can come to see their positions as legitimate (even when subordination is coercive). Yet she also stresses the potential for resistance through development of images of superiority. Thus interactional contexts contribute to micro-level maintenance of class privilege, but also may provide contexts for resisting those privileges. What is missing in these literatures, however, is careful attention to how these multiple statuses are constructed simultaneously. West and Fenstermaker (1995) acknowledge the importance of such analyses, but do not go far in offering theoretical or analytic strategies (Hill Collins et al. 1995).

Behavioral Confirmation

Social construction is an interactional process; self-presentations are shaped by conceptions held by others as well as by oneself. A large literature on behavioral confirmation provides strong evidence that initially false definitions of a situation can evoke behaviors that subsequently make the false belief true (e.g., Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). The social power of the actors involved is important: expectations are more likely to lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy if the expectation is held by a higher-status person. Higher-status individuals have more power to enforce their own preconceptions; lower-status individuals have less power with which to combat false expectations held by others (Snyder 1984).

Evidence of behavioral confirmation is strong for most significant social positions, including gender (Skrypnek and Snyder 1982) and race (Word, Zanna, and Cooper 1974). These studies illustrate how beliefs lead us to test and ultimately to create reality by altering others' behavior. This process does not require actual behavior by the target; it also can occur through reconstructive memory (Snyder and Uranowitz 1978). Thus, cognitive and interactional strategies combine to create a powerfully reproductive system whereby preconceptions and stereotypes about ourselves and others are enacted and maintained.

Status Expectations

The idea of behavioral confirmation is central to expectation states theory (Ridgeway and Walker 1995). Although not generally identified as a symbolic interactionist perspective—indeed, its use of laboratory-based experimental methods is unusual in SI research—expectation states theory shares several important assumptions with SI. Both emphasize actors' perceptions and the social context of interaction, and both assume that these perceptions are socially constructed. In addition, expectation states theory has addressed social inequalities far more explicitly than have other varieties of SI.

Expectation states theory limits its empirical focus to small, task-oriented

groups, and examines the effects of shared performance expectations that result from shared cultural beliefs. These performance expectations are often self-fulfilling, resulting in a "power and prestige order" that favors those for whom the group holds high performance expectations. Actors who are expected to perform well expect more of themselves; in addition, others defer to them, provide them with more opportunities to participate, and evaluate their contributions more favorably.

Performance expectations are often based on status characteristics, including gender, race, education, and age. Because men have higher status than women, for example, actors in a mixed-sex group expect more of men (Pugh and Wahrman 1983). Moreover, evaluation of members' participation is based on a double standard: men's performances are evaluated more favorably than women's, even if they are objectively identical (Foschi 1991). Thus this theory explains how societal beliefs and values are reproduced in small-group, face-to-face interaction. The empirical research in this tradition has focused primarily on gender; although proponents suggest that similar processes occur with other statuses, this is an empirical issue requiring research. Moreover, the expectation states tradition does not address the origins of these differential evaluations.

Resistance and Negotiation

Symbolic interactionists have focused on the interactional construction and negotiation of meaning, and have paid considerable attention to race, class, gender, and sexuality. This does not mean, however, that social *inequality* has been a focus of research. Indeed, the most frequent criticism of symbolic interactionism is its failure to adequately address social structure and power. Because of its focus on everyday interaction, SI often neglects the material and institutional factors that underlie and constrain that interaction.

A telling example is SI's treatment of resistance and negotiation. One of the strengths of symbolic interactionism is its acknowledgment of agency. Individuals may resist traditional expectations, manipulating

their self-presentations to avoid association with a stereotype. According to Gardner (1995), for example, women know that being female suggests to others that they are vulnerable to attack; thus they strategically alter their self-presentation in order to reduce their risk of victimization. Similarly, Snow and Anderson (1993) found that street people resist negative class-based stereotypes by constructing positive personal identities through "identity talk." Thus even identities marked by pronounced social inequalities can be negotiated and resisted by those in stigmatized positions.

Resistance is not always successful, however, a fact that symbolic interactionists too rarely acknowledge. The term *negotiation* implies that the interacting parties have equal opportunity to control the social identities presented: that they come to the bargaining table with equal resources and together develop a joint definition of the situation. Yet this image of fair negotiation is not always accurate, especially in the case of low-status groups. Those with more resources and more power can exert more control over interaction and the negotiation of identities. Despite homeless individuals' attempts to present themselves favorably, for example, they are deeply stigmatized by the rest of the population. And despite a woman's attempts to present herself as invulnerable, she may be attacked nonetheless. Some people, in short, have more control over negotiation than others. These structural power differences are blurred if the focus is limited to the micro interactional level.

CONCLUSIONS

Our review of these three theoretical perspectives and their treatment of social inequality suggests that social psychology must expand its foci and methods if we are to understand race, class, gender, sexuality, and other systems of inequality, as well as how these systems work together. In this concluding section, we present four directions for future research, with discussions of exemplary studies that demonstrate the utility of these approaches.

Theoretical Integration Within Social Psychology

First, we suggest that integration of these three theories will provide a richer understanding of social interaction than does any of the theories alone. Each offers a distinct approach to the relationship between individuals and their social environments; it is useful to treat them as complementary rather than as competing. For example, cognition is central to symbolic interaction: through thought, meanings come to be attached to symbols, and through thought we are able to interpret these symbols. Symbolic interaction is also linked to social exchange: both theories take the interaction rather than the individual as the unit of analysis. Exchange research, however, has focused mainly on the exchange of resources between actors, while SI focuses on the meaning of these resources, as well as on the exchange of cognitive and behavioral manifestations of identities. On the other hand, exchange theory's conceptions of social structure and power are richer than those of SI, and provide a framework that could more successfully contextualize social interaction. The three theories' differing methodologies are also complementary: the experimental rigor typical in social exchange and social cognition research would be enriched by the in-depth ethnographic work common in SI.

Brines on housework. Brines's (1994) analysis of gender and housework integrates exchange theory with symbolic interactionism. Brines takes issue with the assumption that the principles of exchange are gender-neutral: that is, that women and men behave similarly in interaction, and that their outcomes ultimately are different only because they possess unequal resources. She asks why women in heterosexual married couples tend to do over 70 percent of the housework, even when they also work outside the home (Shelton and John 1996).

Brines examines how the relative earnings of husband and wife affect time spent on housework. When men are the principal breadwinners, housework is distributed according to the predictions of exchange theory: women do most of the housework. When the division of labor is reversed, however—

when the woman is the primary breadwinner and the man is economically dependent on her—these dependent men actually do *less* housework on average; this finding runs directly counter to the predictions of exchange theory.

Brines explains these counterintuitive findings as evidence of a “symbolic exchange” that operates along with the economic exchange. She argues that marriage is an institution through which women and men enact gender. Traditionally, men “do gender” by providing resources for their families, while women do gender by providing domestic and emotional labor. When women out-earn men, both partners’ accomplishment of gender is threatened; couples solve this dilemma by distributing housework along traditional lines. This arrangement allows both members of the couple to maintain the illusion that they are adhering to gender norms, despite their nontraditional financial arrangements.

This combination of SI and social exchange provides a powerful explanation for the division of household labor. Cognition is also central to this explanation: beliefs about the kinds of labor that define gender and attributions made about actors’ conformity to those expectations are cognitive constructs.

Attention to Social Context and Its Effects on Behavior and Interaction

Second, we suggest that greater attention should be given to the relationship between behavior, interaction, and the social context in which they take place. Although one of the fundamental assumptions of social psychology is that social context affects behavior, much social psychological research reports findings without analyzing or even acknowledging the context in which those findings were produced.

Also problematic is the fact that much research, especially in social exchange and social cognition, is conducted primarily in the experimental laboratory. Although internal validity is maximized, external validity may be compromised. For example, in their meta-analysis of studies of gender differences in leadership styles, Eagly and Johnson (1990)

found that laboratory studies reported stereotypic gender differences in leadership behavior, while field studies in organizations rarely found such differences. Experimental research has important strengths. Yet if we are to understand the workings of inequality in social life, it is crucial to assess whether patterns found in the laboratory generalize to the real world.

Moskowitz, Suh, and Desaulniers on gender and context. The analysis of situational influences on gender differences in behavior by Moskowitz et al. (1994) is an exemplary study in this regard. It is widely believed that men are more agentic (behaving so as to maximize mastery and power) and that women are more communal (behaving so as to maximize intimacy and solidarity).¹ Eagly (1987), however, argues that these seeming gender differences are actually the result of social roles, one form of social context. The implication is that if women and men occupied the same social roles, they would behave similarly.

Moskowitz et al. tested this hypothesis in a natural setting, the subjects’ workplaces. In keeping with Eagly’s theory, they found that agentic behaviors were affected by social role, not by gender. Subjects tended to behave more agentially when supervising others than when interacting with co-workers or supervisors. In other words, social context rather than sex determined the degree of dominance displayed by an individual in interaction. Thus we suggest that rather than simply reporting group differences in behavior, researchers should also assess the particular social contexts in which these behaviors are produced. This process entails greater attention to social structure and power.

Theoretical Integration With Sociology

This attention to social context applies not only to the local interactional context, but also to larger social structural contexts. Interaction takes place within cultural institutions and historical moments, and these contexts affect patterns of interaction. Everyday behavior is always enacted within the structural constraints and possibilities associated with actors’ locations in social systems. Although social psychologists rarely

have attended to these contexts, we contend that integration with sociology can enrich social psychological understanding. Such integration will entail greater attention to social hierarchies, which are important bases for the systematic allocation of resources, opportunities, and power.

At the same time, however, sociologists must consider the role of everyday interaction in creating, sustaining, and transforming social structures (Howard 1994). We suggest, therefore, that sociological and social psychological approaches are complementary. The study of social inequality provides a clear example of the need for both these perspectives: the social organization of gender, race, class, and sexuality shapes both the micro-level interactional possibilities and the macro-level material resources of individuals. Gender, race, class, and sexuality should be studied not merely as individual-level variables but as systems of social hierarchy.

Nagel on ethnic identity. Nagel's (1995) research on the reconstruction of ethnic identity illustrates the potentialities of such theoretical integration. Nagel "combines a social constructionist model of ethnic identity with a social structural approach to ethnic change" (p. 948) to explain why people who previously had described their race as non-Indian later identified themselves as Indian. At the macro level, she shows how federal Indian policy and American ethnic politics created a political climate that increased ethnic consciousness and pride. At the micro level, she describes how individuals acted on the material and symbolic incentives provided by this political climate to transform their ethnic identity. She also uses the recent history of Indian activism to show that social activism can affect ethnic identity, in contrast to the reverse causal connection common in traditional (but not recent) social movements research.

Nagel's analyses offer a number of useful ideas that may contribute to the social psychological literatures on ethnic identity, especially social cognition, with its extended analyses of social identities, and symbolic interaction, with its focus on symbolic meaning. Her work also has potential for integration with exchange theory, with its focus on material incentives for action. Most impor-

tant, this research can and should contribute to the overdue integration of social psychological approaches to identity with sociological and historical approaches to structure and politics.

Attention to the Simultaneity of Social Identities and Social Statuses

It is not sufficient to study these systems of social inequality in isolation from each other. As argued in many critiques of gender scholarship, race, class, gender, sexuality, and other social identities are not separable and cannot be understood as additive. Rather, they are simultaneous, interacting with each other to provide qualitatively different experiences. Ideally, research and writing would consider all of these statuses simultaneously, in order to clarify how they collectively contribute to individual experience. Generally, however, social psychologists (and the social sciences more broadly) have addressed these statuses separately; thus we have treated them separately at certain points in this paper. Yet some research begins, either explicitly or implicitly, to move toward intersectional analyses.

Hollander on the simultaneity of social inequalities. Hollander (1998) analyzes *Studs*, a television dating game show popular in the early 1990s, to show the interactional dynamics through which gender hierarchies are performed and reinforced. She argues that gender is not separable from other social hierarchies, including sexuality, race, and age. Hollander describes the subtle yet pervasive ways in which female contestants must navigate the delicate line between sexy and slutty. Male contestants, on the other hand, suffer no penalties for being too sexual. Instead, their negotiations center on the need to appear attractive and assertive, especially sexually—and not, at all costs, to appear unmasculine or (worse) gay. Although this point is never articulated explicitly, *Studs* constructs a world in which heterosexuality is the only acceptable option; other sexual identities exist only as a foil for the contestants' performance of heterosexual masculinity or femininity.

Race and class dynamics also are clear in this context. Contestants are marked by their

race, in that nearly all dates are intraracial, and by their class, indicated in participants' attire and in some of the themes of the banter. Markers of age are also present. Very few participants are even over 30 years old, suggesting that beyond a certain age, people are not attractive and do not date. Interactional analyses of this type are becoming more frequent (for other examples, see O'Brien and Howard 1998).

Social psychology holds great promise for illuminating social inequality. In its focus on the relationships between individuals and their social environments, it seems uniquely positioned to disentangle the ways that inequality is produced and maintained. As we have argued above, however, this promise has not yet been realized. Much social psychological research ignores inequality or, alternatively, focuses on group differences, with the implication that such differences are due to the essential natures of those groups rather than to social context or power.

To remedy these problems, both theory and research must be redirected. We suggest that integration of the varying perspectives within social psychology, integration of social psychology with sociology more generally, greater attention to social context, and attention to the simultaneity of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other systems of social hierarchy will move us toward a richer understanding of social inequality.

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